



# THIS'LL KILL YOU

By Cleve Cartmill

**Y**ou wouldn't think that Joe Jordan at Acme Engineering would set himself up as Justice. But a guy has to get what's coming to him.

The cops would call it murder, but so what? How many people know the difference between justice and murder?

If Charley Harris hadn't set himself up as a big shot, the thing wouldn't have built up to where he was a fugitive from a halo—or a pitchfork. But he was one of those hefty, good-looking guys that dames go for, and was foreman of the shop.

And he had the needle out for me. There wasn't any reason for it,

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By Irving Fein

except maybe he saw I was going places and might get his job some day. I was good on my punch press, better than most of those lugs they called operators, but did that carry any weight with Charley? And I behaved myself on the job, worked hard with practically no time out for a smoke, but Charley rode me from the day he was picked off the machine next to mine and made foreman.

That was another thing. They sent an office boy down to call him in to see the president, and when he came back he wore a green button. That dumb kid picked the wrong guy, and I heard that when the big boys found it was Charley instead of me the kid had fingered, they decided to let it go. That shows you what they know about running a business. Everybody in the shop knew I was due for the boost, but that kid couldn't read the difference between machines 48 and 49.

Nobody told me it was a bum rap. Charley had all those milk-kneed sisters in the shop buffaloed. But I knew it was. Still, I went right on doing my job, knowing my turn would come. I didn't have any plan—yet. But I got one, and it didn't take long to work it out, once I got my belly full of his griping.

On this day when I reached my limit, I was fifteen minutes late to work. All the other machines were going, turning out hydraulic valves, when I came into the shop and started mine. Charley walked over, his foreman's overall so white you could see

he never did any work, and he yelled above the other machines.

"Good afternoon, Jordan," he said.

At eight-fifteen yet.

"Save those gags for Jack Benny," I cracked. "I'm fifteen minutes late. Ain't a guy got a right to get here a couple minutes late once in awhile?"

He set his gray eyes on me like they was bloodhounds. "Sure, Joe, but not every other day."

"Well, shucks, Charley," I said. "You know my alarm clock's on the fritz, and I can't buy a new one——"

"Save that for the teacher! Come on, Joe, get on the ball."

That guy! So what if I didn't go to college? So what if I didn't go to high school, even? 'Save that for the teacher.' Who the hell did he think he was, Einstein? Have you got to get a degree to be a smart guy? Not for my dough.

A few of the boys—Sam, Bob, Jim—eased up on their machines to watch us. Charley motioned to them to go on, and the bang-bang-bang of the punch presses started again. I didn't say anything. I just stood still, with the bang-bang-bang echoing inside my head.

Charley said: "Look, Joe. I think your attitude isn't all it ought to be. I think you'd better throw yourself into it."

What the hell! A guy's got a right to take a drink now and then, hasn't he? And if I felt fuzzy the next morning, was it any of his business?

What did it matter if Joe Jordan turned up in the morning with a hangover? What did it matter if he

showed up a little late, and his eyes hurt? Is that a hangin' matter? So what if he did drop a cigarette in a pool of gasoline? Was that something for Charley to go off the deep end about?

Charley seemed to think so. "What the hell are you trying to do?" he yelled. "Set the place afire?"

"Not particularly," I said . . . I didn't add, "Though I don't give a damn, really."

"So read the sign over your machine," he cracked.

"Yeah, I can read."

"Read it to me. Go on. Aloud."

"All right, so it says no smoking, so what?"

"So it means no smoking; I oughta fire you," he yelled.

"Aw, Charley," I said.

"Get back to work," he said.

So that's the way it went, Charley riding me all the time, and the punch presses going bang-bang-bang. Only time I got a rest from that banging was when I'd go get a drink from the water cooler in the hall. The noise faded out then, and the smell of gasoline and oil was fainter out in the quiet corridor. And the water would flow smoothly over your tongue, kind of heavy but still smooth like silk.

Sometimes I'd just stand there by the water cooler thinking. I had plans for Joe Jordan. Big plans. One of these days he was going to be a big shot, bigger even than Charley. Joe Jordan was going to be a boss, or an owner even. No foreman of a small time outfit, but a guy with a classy

car, an eighteen-room house, a beautiful wife, a——

A beautiful wife. A gal with stuff where stuff was needed. Harriet. I like the dark kind. They walk kind of like cats. A blonde can swing along, does sometimes. A blonde throws her hips around. But take one of those dark gals, with eyes like old wells, and they can give you the business by just asking the time of day.

That was Harriet. A beautiful wife. That was for me.

She had a kind of smell—well, fragrance, then—like apple blossoms in the spring. Perfume, I guess, but when she passed you in the hall, with her hips moving just as little as possible, you didn't think of perfume; you thought of apple blossoms.

Sometimes I'd meet her at the water cooler, and we'd gab a little. It was Hello, Joe, Hello, Harriet, how are things? It was Say, you're looking good today. It was, Can I help you. It was like that.

She was in the stenographic department, and all the guys were on the make for her, but she had a yen for me. Not that she ever said anything, but I could tell. I know dames.

Once, we had a long talk at the water cooler, and I knew I could take her out whenever I was ready; and when they announced the company dance, I was good and ready. I didn't want her to think I was anxious—you gotta keep dames in their places—so I just waited, and a week before the dance I met her at the water cooler again and managed to bump her as I got a paper cup.

"Pardonnay mwar," I said.

She gave me a look out of those long, dark eyes, and it seemed awful quiet in the corridor, and clean all of a sudden. No gasoline smell, no bang-bang-bang of the punch presses. I gave her back a look that was as good as she sent, and it took in everything. She had it, brother. Everything in its proper place, and lots of it.

She flushed, but I could see she was pleased. Dames like to be noticed.

"You speak French?" she said.

"Chershay la fum," I said. "Common tally voo."

She smiled. It was just a little smile, and she crushed the paper cup in her long white hand and threw it in the wastebasket.

She was flustered, all right. A couple more remarks and I'd have her on the ropes.

"Excuse me, Joe," she says. "I got to get back."

She started to walk away, but I know when I got an advantage. Now was the time to make the pitch. I took her arm and turned her back. Her arm was soft, and firm, too. You know? Like a ripe peach.

"Now, wait a minute," I said, while she stood with her eyes on the floor. When she twitched her arm, I turned it loose. You don't want to push dames too far. "I got a lot of accomplishments, besides speakin' French," I said. "Did you know I took second place in the jitterbug contest at Ocean Park last year?"

"No, I didn't," she said real soft, so I could hardly hear her.

"Well, I did. Do you Lindy?"

"No, I guess I'm pretty old-fashioned."

She still didn't look up, and she turned away a little. Well, I know when to shoot the clincher. "Oh, I can do the square stuff, too," I said. I took her arm again, and turned her back to me.

She looked up, and her eyes were steady and dark. She wasn't smiling; scared to give herself away, I guess. Dames are like that.

"I really must get back, Joe."

"Wait," I said. "I just happened to think. Isn't the company throwing a dance? Seems to me I heard something."

"Yes. It's next Saturday."

"Well, look, I'll take you," I said. "We'll show those monkeys something fancy in the way of—"

"I'm sorry," she broke in. "But I can't."

That was just the come-on. I grinned. "Can't? You needn't be ashamed of your dancing. I can lead you, even if you've got two left feet. With me you'll look like Ginger Rogers."

"That's not it, Joe. I already have a date with Charley."

"Charley Harris?"

"Yes."

Now, I didn't mind him riding me. I could take it, and there wasn't anything he could do. He was scared to fire me. Anybody could see how he took it easy around me. But when he moved in behind my back and tried to take my girl, well, something had to be done. I didn't let

Harriet see what I was thinking, though. That's not the way to handle dames.

I just smiled. "Oh, well," I said. "It's not important."

She turned and walked away, and I stood there for a few minutes thinking. I didn't get very far, because I seemed to hear the punch presses going bang-bang-bang inside my head. That had been happening every once in a while lately. I went back to the job, and guess who was waiting at my machine for me?

He looked at me with those still gray eyes, and I had to tip my head back a little to meet them. He was maybe three inches taller than me, but flabby. I wasn't afraid of him.

"Drop that cigarette!" he said, like he was talking to a dog.

I hadn't realized I had lit one, I'd been so busy thinking, but I wasn't going to let him push me around. I blew smoke in his face.

First thing I knew he knocked the cigarette out of my hand and stamped on it. And the war was on. Nobody can do that to Joe Jordan and get away with it.

I led with my left, jabbing at his chin, getting set for my Sunday punch. He must've been off balance, because he swayed back away from my left and when he straightened up he was waving his arms trying to get his balance and he caught me one on the jaw that made me blink. I danced back, sneering at the awkward way he handled himself, and machines began to shut down all around.

I heard Smitty yell: "Hey, you

guys. Stop it! Somebody'll get hurt."

I just smiled. I knew who was going to get hurt, and it wasn't going to be Jordan.

Other guys began to yell. "Cut it out!" "Hire a ring!" and things like that, and I could hear feet running toward us.

I wasn't going to let this chance get away. If I had to do it quick, I'd do it quick. I flicked my left at him and started my right for the old one-two.

Well, he hit me a lucky punch. Never would have happened in a million years. He knocked me out. He was standing by the cot when I came to, with oil and grease all over me, and his eyes was worried.

"Joe," he said, "I'm sorry this—"  
"Get outta here!"

He went back to the shop, and the company nurse felt my pulse. She made a note on a pad, and smiled at me. "I think you'll be all right now," she said. "But be careful around those machines. You might get hurt the next time."

I knew where I stood then. He'd been afraid to say he got into a fight with one of his own crew. He was scared of me. And he didn't report me to the front office, trying to get in good with me again, hoping I'd forget his dirty tricks.

Joe Jordan forget? Not much. Joe Jordan always remembers when people do him dirt, especially riding him for nothing and trying to steal his girl.

The guys in the shop, trying to keep in good with Charley, acted like

cowards always do. They started throwing the hooks into me every day.

Like Smitty. Smitty was a card.

"Still leading with your-chin?" he'd say every day. "That chin jab of yours is the prettiest thing since Benny Leonard's left, Joe."

The other guys around me—Jim, and Sam, and Bob—they'd giggle like girls in a locker room, as if they thought Smitty was a great wit.

"Come out to my house some evening, Joe, and go a few rounds with my three-year-old kid. He's getting a little rusty."

And so on. It might have got another guy down. But not Joe Jordan. He's too tough. He had plans. Not to be a foreman for a small-time outfit, either. A guy with Joe Jordan's brains could be a big guy, maybe even an owner, with a long car and a driver and a big home with a billiard table and a beautiful wife . . .

Like Harriet. Joe Jordan had plans for her, too. So with big stuff like that on his mind, he couldn't afford to pay any attention to the needling. Not from a bunch of half-wits.

Charley was more scared of me after that than before. He took pains not to say anything except when he had to, and I never even looked at him. Even when I didn't get to the job until 8:30 one morning, Charley never said a word. He stood beside me for a long time, but I guess he didn't have the nerve to bawl me out.

I wouldn't have been late, except for that bang-bang-banging inside my

head. It was getting worse at night. I'd go around to Nick's after work and have a few drinks, but even that stopped helping me sleep. I'd lie awake in the dark, with the punch press pounding inside my head, and sometimes it would be saying "Charley-Charley-Charley" or "Harriet-Harriet-Harriet" and I'd finally get to sleep about three or four. Nobody could blame me for oversleeping once in a while.

That just shows you how I was planning for Joe Jordan. I did a lot of thinking about that young man when I couldn't sleep. I'd see him drive up to the plant about ten, or even noon, in this block-long jalopy, and pass through the "Hello, Mr. Jordans."

Even from Charley. Joe Jordan didn't hold a grudge. Charley was still at the plant—sweeping out.

I'd figured it all out. The first thing I'd do would be to get Harriet in my arms at the dance, and after I showed her a couple of fancy steps she'd send Charley back to the wall. That was the first move. After that, Nature could have her head.

When I got to the dance Saturday, things had already started. The company had hired a big ballroom, and a ten-piece combo with too many strings, but that could give out with a beat. Most everybody seemed to be there, the men in suits and ties and the girls in evening dresses that made the big floor look like a field of poppies. The walls were lined with chairs, and quite a sprinkling of dames you wouldn't want to dance with. And a

bunch of guys were hanging around the punch bowl.

Some of 'em were from the shop, and they gave me a small hello. Not Smitty, though. The little squirt went all out, even offering me a glass of the pink stuff.

"I wouldn't rub it in my hair," I told him. "I stopped on the way."

"So I notice," he said.

Which was a lie. I'd only had a few at Nick's, and I can carry my liquor. Nobody could tell I'd had a drink. But I didn't say anything.

I looked around for a chair and sat in it. Smitty and a couple other guys stood looking at me, but I didn't pay any attention. I was searching the floor.

I saw her, finally, in a kind of blue dress that looked like sea spray, dancing with guess who. He was grinning down at her like an ape, and she was being polite by grinning back. The orchestra was playing one of those schmaltz things full of eyes and skies and love and above.

"Didn't you bring a dame, Joe?" Smitty asked.

"I got a doll here," I said.

"Dancing with some other guy, huh?"

"Yeah, dancing with some other guy."

Smitty laughed and spoke to the other guys. "If my skirt was dancing with some other guy, I'd cut in."

Then they laughed, like Smitty had made a big joke. But it wasn't a joke, it was good, sound stuff. I didn't know why I hadn't thought of it.

"That's a good idea, Smitty," I said. "Thanks." It don't cost anything to be polite.

They were doing some laughing as I went out on the floor, but I paid no attention. I was too busy trying to dodge the clumsy fools that didn't know what to do with their feet. Even as it was, and with me as smooth on my feet as I was, two or three couples bumped me. I didn't stop for their apologies, I kept my eye on Harriet and Charley.

Charley had an expression on his face like somebody's just hit him between the eyes with an axe. He looked off into space, and held Harriet close, with his chin just touching her black hair. I couldn't see her face, but I could picture the frown there. Charley was leading like his legs were lead from the knees down, and I could just see what Harriet's shoes would be like if I didn't rescue her.

When I reached them, I put out a hand to tap Charley on the shoulder, but he must have stumbled, and I stuck a finger in Harriet's ear. She jumped and stopped dancing. Charley turned to see what was the matter, and then he looked at me like I was trying to collect the rent.

"Pardonnay mwar," I said as politely as pie. "I'm cutting in."

"Oh, no, you're not," Charley said.

I looked him up and down, and the dancers swung past us, paying no attention. "I didn't ask the pleasure of you, Charley. Now, if you'll just go about your business—"

I started to take her arm.

She pulled away. "But this is our

favorite number, Joe!"

I got to admit I was surprised for a minute, but then I got it. She was afraid, afraid of a two-bit foreman. "So," I said. "So I can't cut in because he's the big boss."

"No," Charley said, "But because you're the big dope. Now beat it."

Charley was laughing as they danced away, and I thought about going after him and having it out right there. The dirty rat, taking advantage of the fact that a dumb office boy picked him off the wrong machine to be made foreman! But then I thought how undignified it would be to break up the company dance. All these people had come here to have a good time, and they worked hard all week and deserved it. If I started a fight, it would stop the dance, and maybe I'd put Charley in a hospital, and there would be a lot of fuss and bother that would put the fritz on the party.

"What's the matter, bub?" somebody said as he danced past. "Lose your girl?"

I whirled around. "Who said that?" I yelled.

About forty guys yelled back, "I did!"

Well, you can't fight an army, though I would have taken 'em on if something hadn't happened. That was the bang-bang-banging in my head. It started up as I stood there, and I couldn't seem to do anything. I could see the dancers moving past, some of them looking at me like I was the tattooed lady or something, some of them grinning like camels,

but it was like I was outside by own body and watching the whole thing. This bang-bang-bang of the punch presses drove everything else out of my head, and I couldn't get any orders to my feet. The dance ended, the floor cleared, and still I stood there, not able to move.

Smitty came out pretty soon, and took me by the arm. "Come on, boy," he said, and the me that was really me could see him leading me off the floor. I didn't feel embarrassed, because that was only my body, with a headful of noises, he was taking away. The real me was just watching, like most everybody else in the place.

Nobody seemed to be sore, or amused. They just watched with empty faces. But the last thing I saw as I went out the door was Harriet laughing with Charley.

That stayed with me as I tried to sleep, and the punch presses ran full blast in my head.

Maybe she wasn't much good, after all. How could a dame be much good when she'd take Charley instead of me? I should have been foreman, would have been except for a dopey kid that couldn't count. I had big plans, I had a future. And what did Charley have? Nothing to look forward to. He'd always be a straw boss.

There was one thing sure, though. As long as I stayed at Acme, Charley was in my way. He was down on me, even if he was scared of me, and he wouldn't put in a word for my promotion. And I might as well stay at Acme. I'd just as soon own it as

any other company. But Charley was in the way.

All of a sudden the banging stopped in my head. For the first time in weeks, there was silence, a soft, cool quiet, like Sunday morning when you were a kid and nobody was awake in the house but you. Like Christmas night after the excitement of the presents was over, and you could think about the new sled.

And for the first time in weeks, I could think clearly, and see my way before me.

**J**USTICE was all I was after. A guy who lives the best he can and don't hurt anybody has a right to justice. And I knew how I could get it, all right.

There was only one thing I needed. A motive.

I didn't go around to Nick's for a couple of nights. I went home and thought, and the quiet inside my head was swell. It had been a long time since I'd felt so good, and when I went to bed after trying to figure out a motive I slept like a kitten.

I found it, all right. Any guy with Joe Jordan's brains will solve any problem if he just thinks about it long enough. And I figured out how to establish it.

First chance I got, I took Smitty to one side when I came back from the water cooler. I'd gone out to see where Charley was headed, and when I saw him go into the men's john, I hurried back to the shop. "Smitty," I said. "I just heard Charley and Harriet quarreling out in the hall."

"Aw, just a lovers' spat, I guess. I remember when I was going around with my old lady, we'd fight about the damndest things. Don't mean a thing."

"Yeah? Well, I don't know, Smitty. I heard things aren't going so hot there."

"You're nuts, Joe."

"Well, that's what I heard. I'd sure hate to see it go sour on Charley."

Smitty raised his eyebrows. "Do my ears lie?" he said. "How comes this interest in Charley, after what happened?"

I looked embarrassed. "I figure I was wrong about that. I guess Charley's really a swell guy."

"That," Smitty said, "you can bet your neck on."

I wasn't betting my neck. Not Joe Jordan. Joe Jordan had use for his neck, better than to bet it on anything. He was going to use it for a long time to carry that headful of brains around.

I put them to work, too. I stepped up my production, and since I was sleeping nights I wasn't late any more. Charley started grinning at me when he passed, and one day he stopped and put his hand on my shoulder.

"Joe," he said, "I wanta tell you how pleased I am with the work you're doing these days."

"Could we talk about it after work, Charley?" I said, not shutting down my machine. "I don't want to slow down."

Charley laughed and slapped me

on the back. "Okay, fella."

I looked at him outa the corner of my eye as he went away. *You called me a big dope once*, I thought.

Funny, what it can do for you when a foreman is friendly. The guys quit needling me about this and that. It was "Hello, Joe" and "Howsa boy" every morning, and one day at noon Jim Brannigan offered me one of his sandwiches. It was a good chance to drop the word to him.

"Funny about Charley and Harriet, hey, Jim?"

"Whadda ya mean, Joe?"

I led him over near my machine where nobody could hear us. "Oh, I was just thinkin'. Of course, you see guys and gals bust up right at the church door, but I thought Charley and Harriet really had something cookin'."

Jim frowned, looking like a puzzled horse. "Say, I did hear something along that line, Joe, but I didn't believe it."

"Well, I do. I heard them arguing plenty in the hall the other day."

It didn't take many more of these cracks before you could notice a difference in the shop. The men said "Hi Charley" a little too loud, and whenever he'd make a dopey wise-crack they'd laugh like they was getting paid for it. It was maybe a week when Marty Chalmers came to me and gave me back a piece of info I'd planted less than an hour before.

"Say, lissen, Joe," he whispered. "Now don't say I told ya, but I heard Joe and Harriet busted up last night after a hell of a scrap." Marty

wasn't very bright, but he was bright enough for Joe Jordan to use.

"That's old news, Marty," I said. "It was over a guy upstate. She better be careful how she treats Charley. He's a tough egg when he's pushed too far."

"He oughta bust her head wide open, two-timing a white guy like him."

Charley caught sight of us talking, and started towards us. Marty went back to his machine, looking like a ground squirrel with his buck teeth, but I just stood staring at the floor like I was thinking hard.

"Any trouble, Joe?" Charley asked.

I jerked my head up. "Huh? Oh, no. I was just thinkin' about an idea to speed production here."

"Yeah?" he said. "Like to talk about it?"

"Uh, not yet, Charley. A couple bugs to get out of it."

"Let me know," he said. "That's the kind of attitude we like around here, Joe."

We. You'd think he owned the company. A big shot, yet. In *my* job. I was ready to show him a few things.

My opportunity came next day. I heard him make a date with Harriet for that night.

His last date, only he didn't know it.

When he went into the washroom that evening at quitting time, I left my gloves on and shoved a steel pipe under my coat. It was the pipe Charley used when a punch press got stuck, and it had his fingerprints all over it.

As he walked out to the gate, I fell in beside him. "Say, Charley, about that idea. I got it all worked out in my room in a model. Like to drop over this evening?"

He grinned at me. "Sorry, Joe, can't tonight. Got a date with an angel."

"But, Charley, this'll boost production way up. You oughta be interested."

"I told you I've got a date."

We'd stopped, and a few of the boys gathered around. I looked at them, and then I gave Charley a real once-over, with just the touch of a sneer.

"You're always giving me pep talks when it doesn't cost you anything. Okay, Charley, I took you up on it. I've been givin' my nights to work out this idea I have. I don't expect nothin' out of it. But when I ask you to give up a measly hour, you're too busy. Why can't you come over after your date?"

Charley kept on grinning, and he winked at the guys around us.

"Take it easy there, boy. I didn't know you were so hot about this. Well, Joe, I'll do it, but this is one of the most important dates of my life. But I guess I can break it off and be over about eleven."

I watched when he said it was an important date, but none of the guys smiled like they were supposed to. I mean, when the boss says he's got a big deal on with a dame, you're supposed to grin like you hoped she came through.

Not the guys, though. They

thought they knew she was two-timing him, and that he was being taken for a ride.

"Okay, Charley," I said. "If I'm not in when you get there, I'll just be down at the corner for a beer or a pack of butts. Just go on in."

"See you later, boy."

Smitty dropped in beside me as we walked out the gate.

"So he's got a heavy date. He seemed glad."

"Well," I said, "maybe they'll settle it. I hope so. I'll buy you a beer, Smitty."

"By golly, Joe, that's the first time you ever asked me. I'll take you up on it."

You have to be smart to take advantage of the little things. Like buying Smitty a beer. We had two or three, and I pretended to feel them, and Smitty told me I'd better not have any more, why didn't I go home and go to bed. I said I thought I would, and he went home with me. He'd testify to that, if he was asked. And that whole situation was something I grabbed onto when I saw the chance.

Joe Jordan had brains.

After I got a bite of dinner, I went over to Charley's boarding house, taking my time because I wanted him to be gone. He was, and his window was open.

It only took a few seconds to find what I wanted, a handkerchief with Charley's initials on it. I was outside and walking down the street before I had time to get nervous.

I had a few drinks at a bar until

about ten-thirty, then drove over to Harriet's house and waited, down the street. Here they came in a little while, walking like there wasn't anybody else in the world.

You know? You can spot 'em every time, people like that. They don't have to have their arms around each other, or anything like that. They don't even have to touch each other. But it's in the way they turn their heads, or take a step, or flip a cigarette butt away.

It was like that with them, and I had to grin to myself how surprised a lot of people were going to be real soon. They stopped at Harriet's gate, talked a while, then Charley looked at his watch and kissed her. He went off down the street, and she went inside.

I gave her time to get her coat off. Then I put on my driving gloves, took the steel pipe, and went over and rang her doorbell. I could hear her radio playing, that schmaltz full of eyes and skies and love and above.

She called out: "Who's there?"

"It's me, Harriet. Joe Jordan." I pitched my voice low so none of the neighbors could hear me. "I got to tell you something about Charley."

The door opened fast, and she stood there with one hand at her throat, her eyes big and dark. "What is it, Joe? What's happened? He just left here a minute——"

"Now, don't get excited," I said. "Nothing's happened. I'm just playing a little trick on Charley."

She let out her breath like she'd been punctured. "You—frightened

me. Come in. I was just making a little home recording of this song on the radio. Charley'll get a big kick out of it. It's a terrific arrangement, don't you think?"

So she had to chatter! I took a step closer. "You kinda like that song, don't you?"

"It's our favorite, Charley's and mine."

I took another step. "You kinda like him, too, don't you?"

She smiled. "I guess it is terribly obvious. Sit down, Joe, and I'll tell you a secret." I didn't sit down. "We were going to tell everybody in a few days, but you might as well know now. Charley and I are going to be married in three weeks, on our vacations. Isn't it wonderful?"

"If true," I said.

She raised her voice a little. "What do you mean? Why are you looking at me like that?"

I took another step. I was almost close enough. "That's what I came to tell you. This'll kill you, baby. You're not going to marry him or anybody else. You're taking your vacation right now."

"Are you kidding?" She asked it like she really wanted to know. Then her face set, and she pinched her mouth down. "Get out of here, you big dope!"

"So I'm a dope, am I? I guess you thought I was a dope all the time. I didn't see through you for a while, but I finally learned what a little fool you really are, and Joe Jordan's got ways of dealing with fools who think he's a dope."

I jerked out the pipe and swung it.

She let out just one small yip before it hit her, not loud enough to attract any attention. She fell all sprawled out, but I knew she was only unconscious. So I hit her, I lost count of the times, and when it was over I was scared.

I guess that's only natural. They say any guy with guts gets scared after it's all over. They're telling you right, brother. All I wanted to do was get out of there fast. Suppose the phone should ring, suppose somebody should come in.

But I'd fixed it so clear in my head what I had to do that I kept myself in the room somehow until I stopped shaking. In a few seconds, I was all right again. Nobody was going to come in, and if the phone rang, I wouldn't answer it. It wouldn't disturb Harriet.

Eleven-ten. Five minutes to wait. I spent that in messing the joint up, turning over a chair and stuff, to make it look like they'd had a fight, and dropped the handkerchief on the floor. Then I took the pipe and smashed the clock. It stopped at eleven-fifteen.

I blew the place and raced home. I ran up the stairs, afraid Charley might have left, but he was still there, pacing the floor. He gave me a hard look.

"Where you been, Joe? I was just getting ready to leave."

"I'm sorry, Charley. I got stuck. Sit down, I'll give you a drink."

He didn't. "Where's the model?"

He was plenty sore.

I poured him a drink. He took it. "Now, look, Charley. Where I got stuck was at the welders, trying to get the model. I was sure it would be here tonight, but you know how it is getting things done these days. Relax, have another drink. We can make it tomorrow night."

I wanted him to stay long enough so that he wouldn't go back to Harriet's, and I got another drink into him. The third one was easy and before long he was telling me about the traveling salesman and the old maid in Dubuque.

He got up to leave about midnight. "Didn't know it was so late, Joe. Gotta get to bed, y'know, do a good day's work."

"Yeah. Say, Charley, how'd that important date turn out?"

He put on an expression like a cow in fresh clover. "Swell, Joe, in spite of you."

I was at work the next morning at eight on the dot, and Charley made a two-finger salute at me as I started to work. I gave him the high sign—we were pals, now, weren't we? I worked along for an hour or so, and the kid from the front office—the one that made the original mistake—came in and spoke to Charley.

He went away. He didn't come back.

After quitting time, when I was walking out the gate, I spotted them. One of them walked up to me. He was a big guy, and in uniform. As soon as he spoke, I relaxed a little. Not too much, though, they can pull tricks as well as anybody.

"Joe Jordan?" he said.

"Yeah. What've I done now?"

"That," he said, "remains to be seen. The Loot wants to talk to you."

The lieutenant said his name was Sullivan, and he was on homicide. Would I come down to headquarters? Nothing serious, really. Just a few questions.

"Hey, what the hell?" I said, when we were on our way. "Picking me up, in front of everybody. What'd I do?"

"I don't know," Sullivan said.

"Where were you last night?"

"How the hell would I know?"

I pulled my shoulders together as the uniformed driver ran between a truck and a cab, with the siren wide open. "Home, I guess. Oh, sure. I went to bed about nine-thirty. Why?"

"Did you see Charley Harris last night?"

"Well," I said, pretending to think, "I saw him when we left the plant, but—hey, where's Charley now? He left the shop about ten this morning."

"Never mind. He says he was in your room about eleven-fifteen."

I thought this over. "Well, if he says he was, he probably was. Charley's a white guy. He don't lie about things."

"I thought you said you went to bed about nine-thirty."

The driver missed a bus by the thickness of a whiskey label, and I braced myself. "Does he have to do that?" I asked.

"Stock in trade," Sullivan said. "Well?"

"Oh, yeah. Well, I went to bed at

nine-thirty. But if Charley says he was at my place he was. Maybe I was asleep, maybe I was talking in my sleep when he was there. Say, wait a minute! If Charley's in a jam, I wanta know what he said. I won't talk any more."

"Save it, kid," Sullivan said, as the driver did an S around a furniture van. "Now, tell me. Do you know Harriet Slate?"

I took my eyes off the road for this one. I looked at Sullivan, fair and square. "That no good, two-timing bitch," I said. "Double-crossing a swell guy like Charley. Why, he was just telling me when he left the plant last night he was going to get it settled once and for all."

The lieutenant smiled. I said: "Now what? Did I say something wrong? What's this all about, anyway?"

"Never mind, kid," he said.

The trial was like that. Charley was with her that night. Proved. The steel pipe was his. Proved. They was his fingerprints. Proved. And the motive?

The boys furnished that.

"They fought in the hall."

"They were having trouble."

"Some guy upstate."

The *piece de resistance*—that's French—was the clock. He said he'd been at my place at eleven-fifteen, but I said I didn't know. And the clock was smashed at that time.

So the judge said: "Charles Harris, a jury of your peers have found you guilty of murder in the first degree," and set the time for sentence.

So I was made foreman in Charley's place, my first step up. I'd just as soon own Acme as any other company. And I rode the lazy bastards in the shop. I could make a better record than Charley. And there was a little girl in the steno department.

It was about a week before Charley was supposed to be executed when the kid came down from the front office and told me I was wanted. I thought, "This is it, bud. They're gonna give you another raise. Maybe even a supervisor."

I went in, and who was there but Lieutenant Sullivan, of homicide. I blinked at him, and then shook hands. "Glad to see you, Lieutenant."

"Could you come down to headquarters, Jordan?" he asked. "There's a couple of loose ends on this Harris case."

"But I thought that was all cleaned up," I said. "Poor old Charley took the rap."

He shrugged. "Well, you know how it is. Little things crop up . . ."

At headquarters, we went into a little room that had nothing in it

but a desk, a radio, and a couple cops. They were listening to the radio, that schmaltz thing about eyes and skies.

"Turn that damn thing off," Sullivan growled.

"Aw, Loot," one of them, the one that looked like an Arabian baboon, said, "that's my fav'rite."

"Okay, okay," Sullivan said. He sat down behind the desk and looked at me. "Harriet Slate's mother came and got her things not long ago, including a home recorder," he said.

Just then, coming over the schmaltz music, I heard: "—a terrific arrangement, don't you think?"

It was Harriet's voice. Then I heard my own voice: "You kinda like that song, don't you?"

And it went right on down, every word we'd said, while that damn machine was recording. I jumped to my feet, but one of the big cops grabbed and held me. Then the recording reached, "That's what I came to tell you. This'll kill you, baby. You're—"

"Turn it off," Sullivan said.

